

Year B Easter 4 2024 More than a Feeling John 10 vv11 to 18

This Sunday is often called Good Shepherd Sunday and we do hear a lot today about God being the Shepherd who guides and cares for us. But I am wondering if you noticed something else in our Gospel story today, something else that was repeated even more than the words, “I am the good shepherd”. “I lay down my life.” Those words kept being said again and again. I lay down my life for the sheep. I lay down my life in order to take it back up again. I lay down my life of my own accord. I have the power to lay it down. I have the power to take it back up again. I lay down my life for my sheep.

So, today’s story is about more than being guided. It is about more than being devoted followers of Christ. It is about relationship. And more than just a casual relationship – it is a relationship so close, so strong, so intimate, that God lays down his life for us.

Relationship. “I know my sheep and my sheep know me,” Jesus tells us. Last Saturday morning at the monthly breakfast, Geoff read us a devotional story about a hunter who used his “grunt call” – the horn that you blow through and it makes a sound like a male deer – he used his grunt call and, for the first time, a deer actually heard and responded to this call. This man was astounded and he reflected on the experience: “I was absolutely amazed,” he said, “that I, a human, could connect vocally with such an animal as the elusive whitetail deer. Using a manmade device I had actually spoken to a creature that is not just different from me in degree, but in kind” (p.24-25 of *A Look at Life from a Deer Stand Devotional* by Steve Chapman).

He then reflects that it is amazing that God chooses to communicate with us and that we have the ability to hear God's voice as different as we are in kind: We are human. God is God. We, seemingly, are so very unlike God. But God created us in God's image – this means that we have the ability – and the choice – to learn how to model ourselves after God in certain ways. We are continuously striving to love as God loves, to forgive as God forgives, to show compassion, radical hospitality, abundant generosity...all as God does. We are a work in progress yet the Almighty God beyond us also chooses to be the Almighty God with us and within us – in an intimate relationship. We, however, do not always turn to God's voice to lead the way.

We live in a world filled with people looking for saviours. Knowing how to tell a hired hand from the real deal would save us a lot of heart ache. But most people don't seem to be looking for a saviour in the religious sense. We are looking for people who, we think, can make our lives better. We look for political saviours who promise to save us from our economic and social fears. For relationship experts and social media influencers who will save us grief by unlocking the missing magic that must be keeping our families from being the picture of perfection we think they ought to be. We look for the next miracle drug, diet pill, or procedure that will save our youth, our vitality, our physical appearance. The list goes on and on. If you watch tv at all, you'll notice how many gambling and betting commercials there are, how many weight loss ads, investment ads, find your better self, better life ads – and all of them pull us in by convincing us that what they have makes a better life attractively easy. Why bother going to the gym when you take Ozempic or Rybelsus? Why bother working hard to earn money when you can gamble and win money?

But really, how many of our political, social, and economic systems are designed towards compassion and care? The pharmaceutical company producing Ozempic doesn't care if you're a diabetic buying their product because you need it to survive or if you're an overweight working mother with the money to spend on an easy weight loss solution. They care that you're buying their product. Capitalism creates consumers and a push for profit by creating cycles of perceived need and a sense of lacking something or missing out on something. Online influencers aren't paid for making the difference in one person's life; they get money from the large numbers of people visiting their website or watching their videos. The sad reality is that, as we're looking for a saviour in these spaces, we are more likely to find a hired hand who themselves are ready to run, ready to sell the next fear or sell the next product when the one they are currently promoting loses its charm (adapted from Chelsey Harmon, cepreaching.org).

Jesus is the real deal, he assures us. He won't run when the going gets tough. He lays down his life for us. He does this because he loves us and loves the world around us. Each of the readings today have to do with love. You didn't hear the word "love" spoken in all of the readings though because we are being shown how to rethink what it means to love and how to love. God teaches us to think of love beyond whispered sweet nothings, chocolates and flowers, attraction and compatibility, feelings and desires. Love is a choice, not a feeling. Love is an action, not a state of being. Love is about the truth we do, not what we say. "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action," John writes. Love God. Love neighbour. Our choice. Our actions.

This good shepherd kind of love we hear about in all of the readings is an all or nothing kind of love. It's an everyone and all of creation kind of love. "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold," Jesus tells us. "I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." Sheep that don't belong to this fold: The people who walk through the doors of a church building, into a new fold, have been called by God to be there. If you're sitting here, the Holy Spirit brought you here. Called by God you are already included in the flock. The church does not include. God includes. We make room. We make room. One flock, one shepherd – this is the goal of God's love because God's love is active, it is doing, it is showing, it is a love that gathers and welcomes.

We heard John say this morning that we are commanded to love each other as God loves us. That love for God and neighbour, that love brings us into relationship with our shepherd – such an intimate relationship of love, John tells us, that we live in God and God lives in us. If we are commanded to love as God loves then that changes how we understand the story we heard. Here is how the great preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor puts it:

The good shepherd...lays down his life for the sheep. But then what happens to the sheep, you are wondering – who protects them after he is dead? Well, I will tell you. On the night before he died, they all fell asleep after a big meal, with the sound of the shepherd's [voice] in their ears. And as they slept, they shared a terrible dream: of wolves with clubs and torches who came out of the woods, led their shepherd away, and tore him to shreds on a hillside outside of town. In the dream, they huddled for safety, unable to think, unable to move, and they stayed that way for three whole days, wondering if they would starve to death before the wolves came back to finish the job. But then on the third day, they heard a [voice] – far away at first, then drawing nearer – that woke them from their sleep, and they stood once again in the presence of

their good shepherd. Everything was the same again, but everything had changed. Looking around at each other, they saw what had happened. They had fallen asleep as sheep, but they had woken up as shepherds. As they slept, every one of them had been changed into the image of their master, and as they stood there staring at one another he handed them staves like his...and sent them out to gather their own flocks. "Do for them as I did for you," he said, and sent them off, [his voice ringing in their ears], to do just that (adapted from Bread of Angels, p.83-4).

We cannot hear this story and think of ourselves only as the sheep, loved by God, following God's voice. Jesus has given to us the task of being both sheep and shepherd. Loving as God loves. He asks us to bring all that we are and all that we have to this moment, this relationship, this person, this need, this injustice, this tragedy, this world, holding nothing back. Caring for the needs of others, fighting to mend the brokenness of the world – giving a love, living a love, that is laying down our lives.

Love. Love that brings us into relationship with our Good Shepherd and leads us to be the shepherd for others. Love. It's more than a feeling. It is being and doing. Listen to his voice...and lay down your life.